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The Production of Pulque in Mexico.

The United States consul-general at the city of Mexico says, in his last report, that it is impossible to separate in thought the average Mexican and pulque. No drink has a stronger hold on any nation than this on the Mexicans, and by Mexican is meant all classes in Mexico other than the Spaniards. Pulque is not the drink of the Spaniard or those of Spanish descent; they drink champagne, claret, sherry, and other imported wines. Among the peons, men, women, and children drink pulque with the same freedom that water is used in Europe. The pulque plant is indigenous to Mexico, often growing wild on the uplands, where—for months and years at times—no rain falls; and it is also largely cultivated in the most careful manner on the llanos de Apam, a large area of plains lying about 60 miles from the city of Mexico. In Spain a plant is found, called pita, somewhat akin to the pulque plant, or Mexican maguey, yet differing so much in its general features that it may be termed a distinct genus. The juices of the pita are unused in Spain, which fact plainly separates it from the family of plants in Mexico. The plants are transplanted when two or three years of age with much care, then cultivated in fields especially prepared for this purpose. Nature requires the plant to be "milked" when the liquid is ready to flow, else the superfluity of juices will cause the growth of a large stem from the center of the plant, shooting up some 15 or 20 feet, putting out branches at the top, which blossom in a cluster of yellowish flowers. These branches are symmetrical, and the effect is like a lofty branch candlestick. When the pulque is first extracted—before the process of fermentation sets in—it is sweet and scentless, and in this state is preferred by beginners. The fermentation takes place in tubs made for the purpose, and to aid or expedite the process, a little madre pulque is added, which hastens the chemical change. At times its fermentation is retarded by a cold spell at the vats, which prevents its transport to the city for a day or two. The city of Mexico has a population, it is said, of 350,000, and at least 250,000 of these use pulque, in preference to water or any other drink. It has been stated that 75,000 gallons of pulque are consumed daily in that city. The stock must be renewed daily, or else it becomes dead and insipid, though, it is said, a certain powder has been discovered which will prolong its life through the second day. The liquid ferments rapidly and strongly, and the casks are left uncorked to prevent explosion. The plant grows eight years before maturity, when the liquid is extracted. In the growth of the plant, a central bulb is formed for its coming juices. This is scooped out, leaving a cavity large enough to hold a few quarts. This cavity is made in the bottom and middle of the plant. The juice exudes into this cavity, and it is taken out daily by being sucked into a long necked gourd, on the siphon principle, by the Indian laborers, and then poured into the tubs and then removed to the vats. The outlay on each plant up to maturity is calculated generally at about 8s., and the return is from 30s. to £2, according to the size of the plant. Its producing life is about five months, and each plant is supposed to yield from 125 to 160 gallons of liquid within that time. The immense fields within a radius of 75 miles of the city of Mexico are planted and cultivated with great care and precision, as there is nothing grown in Mexico that pays better than pulque. Fields of it present an attractive appearance, planted in almost geometrical regularity, extending almost beyond the vision, until the rows seem to concentrate in one plant and into one point at the extreme end. The plants are wholly independent of rain and storm and are of a beautiful deep green color. It is said that as much as $1,000 a day are paid for carriage on the special trains for transporting this liquid into the city of Mexico. The tax on pulque is collected at garritas or gates, before its admission to the city, and then the liquid is distributed in the barricas and pigskins on special carts held in readiness for that purpose. Consul Crittenden says that nothing presents a more ridiculous appearance than one of these pig or hog skins containing about 20 gallons, when being taken round and through the city, the legs sticking out full to the toes of liquid. This is a convenient mode of handling the pulque, as, by simply removing a string from one of the feet, the contents are drawn out. The culture of the maguey in the republic of Mexico is unquestionably increasing very largely; but it would be a mistake to draw the conclusion that arable land is therefore withdrawn from the cultivation of cereals and vegetables. Careful observation will convince everyone that the haciendado only plants the maguey in large areas, where nothing else will grow; and nothing is more common than fringes of maguey, like hedges, around fields of wheat and corn; but where the whole expanse of land is covered with maguey it is because the soil is too poor to produce anything else. The principal regions for the cultivation of the maguey are the arid limestone chain of hills; and here, in many places, the hole for the insertion of the young plant is made with a sort of crowbar with a sharp point, used principally in the extraction of tepatate, the chief building material of the Mexican capital. It is used to aid the young plant by inserting some good soil into the hole. These young plants are suckers, which the mature maguey throws out on all sides, and which have to be removed before the heart is tapped for the sweet sap, which is the agua miel, or honey water of the pulque.

When the laborers draw the sweet sap with their rude siphons, made either of a gourd or a calabash and a hollow horn tip, they discharge the contents into a pig or goat skin swinging at their backs. The agua miel at this stage is like green water in appearance. Some carbonic acid is formed, and it becomes milky, and resembles in taste very good cider. The amount of carbonic acid contained is so great, and the decomposition so remarkably rapid, that in a few hours it would become vinegar, if not closely watched. To prevent this, the pulque dulce, or sweet pulque, is poured into a tinnacal—an ox hide strapped to a square wooden frame, and capable of holding a considerable amount of the liquid. These tinnacals are of various sizes to meet the emergencies of the situation. To the sweet pulque is added an equal proportion of milk, and then a slight dose of infusion of rennet. This is not enough to coagulate it, but sufficient to induce a slight amount of putrescence, as in cheese. The putrid odor and flavor of pulque, as sold in the pulquerias, is due to the rennet alone; for the belief that this is caused by the flavor of the pig skin, in which it is brought to market, is entirely without foundation. From the tinnacal it is poured into hogsheads, by means of pigskins, and it is transferred to the barrels of the vendors from the hogsheads of the haciendado by means of the same skins. In both instances the pulque remains in the skin barely more than a few seconds or minutes before the transfer. The rennet added in the tinnacal is the real cause of the putrid flavor and taste of pulque, and this is removed in private families by means of a chemical substance of a perfectly innocuous character, and some housekeepers add white sugar, and others the juice of oranges. It is a regrettable fact that, in the pulque shops, the beverage is made intoxicating to a maddening degree by the addition of marihuana. The government has made, and is making, every effort to stop the sale of this noxious compound. Consul Crittenden says that the number of deaths from fights in pulquerias in Mexico is incredible. Those whom the poison does not madden it stupefies, and in every great festival, particularly when there are public displays of fireworks, the police have hundreds of persons to look after, who are absolutely helpless from drinking drugged pulque. The leaves of the pulque plant are long and pointed, with prickles along the edge. Sometimes

ese leaves are very large, and the bunches of them, springing from the common stock, are enormous. The bruised leaves are made into a common paper—rather a tough, stiff, and hard paper—and they are also used in their natural state as a protecting thatch for the roofs of the common huts or houses occupied by the peons. A kind of thread is also made from the fibrous texture of the leaves, and a rough needle and pin are made from the thorn, and from the root a cheap and palatable food is made. It is not, therefore, a matter of surprise that the peon class think very highly of the pulque plant in Mexico.

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